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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [PINR](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: PRO-REFORM CANDIDATES WIN
LANDSLIDE VICTORY IN JUNE 29 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

REF: A. KUWAIT 2600
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 2593
[1](#)C. KUWAIT 2568
[1](#)D. KUWAIT 2394
[1](#)E. KUWAIT 2392
[1](#)F. KUWAIT 1638
[1](#)G. KUWAIT 1637

Classified By: CDA Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary and comment: Pro-reform candidates won a resounding victory in the June 29 parliamentary elections as voters sent a clear message to the Government on the need for political reform to combat corruption. Pro-reform MPs now have a clear majority (34) in the 65-member Parliament. Overall Islamist representation increased from 15 to 18 seats with the bulk of these gains going to the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood. Shi'a representation fell by one seat to four total; two pro-Government Shi'a MPs were replaced by two pro-reform, but also Iranian-leaning, Shi'a candidates. Although female turnout was low and none of the 27 female candidates were elected, women's participation in these elections for the first time in Kuwait's history had a tremendous impact and directly contributed to the reformers' victory. The outcome of the election demonstrates the wellspring of popular support for reform and presents a direct challenge to the Government, and the Al-Sabah family in particular. The challenge for reformers will be holding together the fragile liberal-Islamist coalition at the heart of the pro-reform alliance. If it holds together, this pro-reform alliance will be a force for political change. Ultimately, these elections are unlikely to significantly impact the close U.S.-Kuwaiti bilateral relationship. Kuwaiti Islamists are not monolithic and largely support Kuwait's strategic relationship with the U.S. The election of more reformers will put more pressure on the Government to implement political reforms, though it may further delay passage of Project Kuwait. End summary and comment.

A Landslide Victory for Reformers

[1](#)2. (C/NF) Pro-reform candidates won a landslide victory in Kuwait's June 29 parliamentary elections, gaining a clear majority (34) of the 65-member Parliament. (Note: The Prime Minister is required to appoint one elected member of Parliament (MP) as a Minister. Therefore, there are always 49 elected MPs and 16 Cabinet Ministers, who serve as ex officio MPs, in Parliament. End note.) The elections were precipitated by the Amir's dissolution of Parliament on May 21 after the Government and pro-reform MPs failed to reach agreement on an electoral reform proposal. This was the first national election in which Kuwaiti women participated,

both as candidates and voters, since being granted full political rights in May 2005. Overall turnout in the 25 electoral districts averaged 65 percent; female turnout was lower, averaging only 35 percent, though in urban areas female turnout was significantly higher.

¶3. (C/NF) In all, 31 incumbents were re-elected, of whom 21 were part of the 29-member pro-reform bloc in the dissolved Parliament. The biggest losers were members of the 18-member pro-Government Independent Bloc in the last Parliament, of whom 11 were defeated. As expected, Sunni Islamists achieved slight gains, increasing their overall representation from 15 to 18. These gains were achieved primarily by the moderate and pragmatic Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood (refs F and G), which won four additional seats, bringing its total representation in Parliament to six. It is important to note, however, that Kuwaiti Islamists are not a monolithic bloc, and that their increased representation should not be viewed as a threat to U.S. interests in Kuwait or a setback to our freedom agenda (ref D). In one way, their success could be viewed as an ideal outcome: Islamists gained enough seats to give the pro-reform bloc a majority, but not nearly enough to push through their conservative social policies.

¶4. (C/NF) Shi'a representation in Parliament fell from five seats to four. The nature of the Shi'a representation also changed dramatically: two pro-Government incumbents, including former Minister of Commerce Dr. Yousef Al-Zalzal, were defeated and replaced by two members of the National Islamic Alliance (NIA), a conservative, pro-Iran Shi'a political association. The number of liberals remained the same with four seats, though Faisal Al-Shaye from the Kuwait Democratic Forum (KDF) replaced Basel Al-Rashed. (Note: For

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a brief overview of Kuwait's different political associations, see our classified website: <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/kuwait/>. End note.) There are also several new MPs whose political leanings are uncertain (ref B); it is as yet unclear whether or not they will join the pro-reform bloc.

A Triumph, Despite not Being Elected

¶5. (C/NF) Although no female candidate was elected, two came in fifth and one fourth in their respective districts. Dr. Rola Dashti, a high-profile political activist and the recipient of several MEPI grants, received the most votes of any female candidate with 1,539. This result is particularly impressive since Dr. Rola was running in a hotly contested district that included five other female candidates, one of whom, Nabila Al-Anjari, also received more than 1,000 votes. Despite the relatively low turnout among female voters, many in Kuwait are hailing their participation as a momentous achievement and an historic moment for Kuwait. During visits to polling stations June 29, Emboffs observed the enthusiasm and exuberance of female voters and campaigners, which contrasted sharply with the more sedate atmosphere at men's polling stations (ref A). Women's participation had a dramatic impact on both the issues and rhetoric of the elections, and directly contributed to the reformers' victory. It also broke many conservative social taboos and laid the groundwork for women's full integration into Kuwait's political system (ref E).

The Gauntlet Thrown

¶6. (C/NF) The resounding victory of pro-reform candidates demonstrates the wellspring of popular support for political reform in Kuwait and the opposition to corrupt members of the Government and ruling family. According to one political analyst, voters have sent a clear message to the Government, and the ruling Al-Sabah family more specifically, on the

"sweeping desire for reform" and their support for cutting down the number of constituencies. The results also suggest that despite the rumors of some members of the ruling family's flagrant support for pro-Government candidates, they were unable to significantly affect the outcome of the elections. One of those most sharply accused of corruption, Energy Minister Ahmed Al-Fahd, appeared on Al-Rai TV, a private television station, the night before the elections to respond to the allegations leveled against him and to explain his support for Project Kuwait, an \$8.5 billion plan to develop Kuwait's northern oil fields. Clearly his message did not take with voters. The loss of a parliamentary majority will represent a significant challenge to the Government, which is already suffering a lack of confidence from its handling of the standoff over electoral reform.

17. (C/NF) The challenge for pro-reform MPs will be holding together the fragile liberal-Islamist coalition at the heart of the pro-reform alliance. Prior to the elections, there were some indications that rifts were beginning to emerge as each group jockeyed for support during campaigning (ref C). If they can hold the alliance together, this pro-reform majority will be a powerful force for political change. For that reason, the Government is likely to expend every effort to undermine the cooperation between the alliance's ideologically opposite groups.

Impact on U.S.-Kuwait Relations

18. (C/NF) The composition of the new Parliament is unlikely to significantly affect U.S.-Kuwaiti cooperation on OIF and other key shared security interests. The increased number of Sunni Islamists should not be seen as a threat. Kuwaiti Islamists are relatively moderate by regional standards and most support a long-term U.S.-Kuwait strategic relationship. Of some concern is the election of two pro-Iran Shi'a Islamists, who might use the Parliament as a soap box to criticize U.S. policy towards Iran. It is important to note, however, that the Parliament has little, if any, influence on Kuwait's foreign policy, which is set by the Government. On the domestic front, the victory of more reformers will likely increase pressure on the Government to adopt political reforms, starting with a reduction in the number of electoral constituencies. This could potentially lead to a more open, representative democracy in Kuwait, which could serve as a model for other Gulf countries. Ironically, the election of more reformers could also delay parliamentary approval of

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Project Kuwait, which is strongly backed by Energy Minister Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd Al-Sabah, who is seen by many reformist MPs as one of those most responsible for rampant corruption.

Next Steps

19. (C/NF) The Cabinet will submit its resignation on July 1, as is customary after elections. The Amir is expected to call on the Prime Minister to form a new Cabinet later next week after concluding his traditional consultation period. The first session of Parliament is expected to take place on either July 12 or July 15. The new Cabinet is normally sworn in during the first session. Parliament must also vote on all legislation issued by Amiri decree during the dissolution period. In addition, pro-reform MPs could introduce, and theoretically even pass, a five constituency bill during the first session. Parliament is expected to meet only a couple of times before recessing for summer, probably before the end of July.

110. (C/NF) Post will continue to follow post-election developments closely, paying particular attention to the composition of new Cabinet and the cohesiveness of the pro-reform alliance. We are also working on ways to encourage Kuwaitis to capitalize on this pro-reform momentum.

Just one example, the Charge is hosting an ice cream social July 3 for pro-reform youth activists. Over the longer-run, we will also seek to identify potential candidates for appropriately-themed IVP and MEPI-funded programs. Bios on the new MPs should be available on our classified website later this week.

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